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Memorial

To the Senate and House of Representatives of the United States: —

Your Memorialists, the Council of the Massachusetts Historical Society, acting under its instructions, would respectfully call the attention of your Honorable Bodies to certain facts connected with the United States frigate *Constitution*: —

That vessel is now lying at Charlestown, Massachusetts, in a dock also used by the steamships of the so-called White Star Line; she is dismantled, out of repair, and liable at any time to injury from carelessness or accident, if not to destruction. Your Memorialists further represent that in the American mind an historical interest attaches to the *Constitution* such as attaches to no other ship in maritime annals, except possibly the *Santa Maria*, the flag-ship of Columbus, and the *Mayflower*, both of which disappeared centuries ago. The *Constitution* still remains; and it was the *Constitution* which, in the gloomiest hour of the War of 1812–14, appeared "like a bright gleam in the darkness." On the 16th of August of that year, Detroit, with all its garrisons, munitions, and defences, was surrendered to the British forces; on the same day Fort Dearborn, at what is now Chicago, was in flames, and with it "the last vestige of American authority on the Western lakes disappeared." The discouragement was universal and the sense of national humiliation extreme; for it seemed doubtful if even the interior line of the Wabash could be successfully held against an enemy flushed with success. The prophet of yet other disasters immediately impending was abroad, and, according to his wont, further depressed the already disheartened land. It was in this hour of deepest gloom, that, on the morning of Sunday, August 30, the Sabbath silence of Boston was broken and the town stirred to unwonted excitement "as the news passed through the quiet streets that the *Constitution* was below, in the outer harbor, with Dacres," of the *Guerriere*, "and his crew prisoners on board." Thus it so chanced

that the journal which, the next morning, informed Bostonians of the Detroit humiliation, in another column of the same issue announced that naval action which "however small the affair might appear on the general scale of the world's battles, raised the United States in one half hour to the rank of a first-class power in the world." The jealousy of the navy which had until then characterized the more recent national policy vanished forever "in the flash of Hull's first broadside." The victory, moreover, was most dramatic — a naval duel. The adversaries — not only commanders but ship's companies to a man — had sought each other out for a test of seamanship, discipline, and gunnery — arrogance and the confidence of prestige on the one side, a passionate sense of wrong on the other. They met in mid-Atlantic, — frigate to frigate. It was on the afternoon of August 19, the wind blowing fresh, the sea running high. For about an hour the two ships manœuvred for position, but at last, a few minutes before six o'clock, "they came together side-by-side, within pistol-shot, the wind almost astern, and running before it they pounded each other with all their strength. As rapidly as the guns could be worked, the *Constitution* poured in broadside after broadside, double-shotted with round and grape, — and, without exaggeration, the echo of those guns startled the world." Of her first broadside in that action, the master of an American brig, then a captive on board the British ship, afterwards wrote: "About six o'clock I heard a tremendous explosion from the opposing frigate. The effect of her shot seemed to make the *Guerriere* reel, and tremble as though she had received the shock of an earthquake." "In less than thirty minutes from the time we got alongside of the enemy," reported Captain Hull to the Secretary of the Navy, "she was left without a spar standing, and the hull cut to pieces in such a manner as to make it difficult to keep her above water."

The historian has truly said of that conflict, — "Isaac Hull was nephew to the unhappy General [who, three days before the *Constitution* overcame the *Guerriere*, had capitulated at Detroit], and perhaps the shattered hulk of the *Guerriere*, which the nephew left at the bottom of the Atlantic Ocean, eight hundred miles East of Boston, was worth for the moment the whole province which the uncle had lost, eight hundred miles to the Westward. . . . No experience of history ever went to the heart of New England more directly than this victory, so peculiarly its own; but the delight was not confined to New England, and extreme though it seemed it was still not extravagant."

Therefore it is that the Massachusetts Historical Society, already, in 1812, an organization more than twenty years in existence, now directs this Memorial to be submitted, — she, the oldest among them, speaking through her Council for all other similar Societies throughout New England. In so doing it is needless to enter into

the earlier and later history of what was essentially the "Fighting Frigate" of the first American Navy; for, in the memory of the people of the United States, the *Constitution* is, throughout her long record, inseparably associated with feats of daring and seamanship, — devotion and dash, — than which none in all naval history are more skilful, more stirring, or more deserving of commemoration. How can they be so effectively commemorated as by the pious and lasting preservation of the ancient ship, now slowly rotting at the wharf opposite to which she was launched six years more than a century ago?

And while the name of the *Constitution* is thus not only synonymous with courage, seamanship, patriotism, and unbroken triumph, the ship herself is typical of a maritime architecture as extinct as the galley or the trireme. She slid from the ways at what is still known in her honor as *Constitution Wharf* in Boston harbor ten months before Nelson won the Battle of the Nile, and eight years to a day before his famous flag-ship, the *Victory*, bore his broad pennant in triumph through the Franco-Spanish line off Trafalgar; and your Memorialists hold that, in the eyes and minds of the people of the United States, no less an interest and sentiment attach to the *Constitution* than in Great Britain attach to the *Victory*. The *Constitution* in the days of our deep tribulation did more for us than ever even the flagship of Nelson did for England; and, thenceforth, she has been to Americans as a sentient being, to whom gratitude is due.

Yet by Great Britain the *Victory* ever has been and now is tenderly cared for and jealously preserved among the most precious of national memorials. As such, it is yearly visited by thousands, among whom Americans are not least in number. The same care has not been extended over the *Constitution;* and yet your Memorialists would not for a moment suggest, nor do they believe, that the people, the Parliament, or the government of Great Britain are more grateful, more patriotic, or endowed with a keener sense of pride than the people, the Congress, or the Administration of the United States. As for the people, the contrary is, in case of the *Constitution*, incontrovertibly proven by the names of the thousands of pilgrims from all sections of the country annually inscribed on her register. So far as the Government is concerned, its failure to take measures for the lasting preservation of the old ship has been due, in the opinion of your Memorialists, neither to indifference nor to an unworthy spirit of thrift, but to the fact that, amid the multifarious matters calling for immediate action, the preserving of an old-time frigate, even though freighted with glorious memories, has been somewhat unduly, though not perhaps unnaturally, deferred to a more opportune occasion.

None the less, the *Constitution* "is the yet living monument, not alone of her own victories, but of the men behind the guns who won them. She speaks to us of

patriotism and courage, of the devotion to an idea and to a sentiment for which men laid down their lives." Therefore, your Memorialists would respectfully ask that immediate provision be made to the end that the course pursued by the British Admiralty in the case of the *Victory* may be pursued by our Navy Department in the case of the *Constitution*. We accordingly pray your Honorable Bodies that the necessary steps forthwith be taken for preserving the "Fighting Frigate" of 1812; that she be renewed, put in commission as a training ship, and at suitable seasons be in future stationed at points along our coast where she may be easily accessible to that large and ever-increasing number of American citizens who, retaining a sense of affection, as well as deep gratitude, to her, feel also a patriotic and an abiding interest in the associations which the frigate *Constitution* will never cease to recall.

And your Memorialists will ever pray, &c.

CHARLES FRANCIS ADAMS,
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Members constituting the Council of the Society.

BOSTON, December 30, 1903.

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